

Reflections of Kyoto
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As my flight begins its descent into California, I think about how to characterize Kyoto, Japan and my monthlong experience of it...

The Japanese landscape: mountains. I didn't really have a specific mental image of Japan before arriving, but now I picture it as an endless sea of green mountains, punctuated by bits of city. Both from the city surrounded by them, and from the mountaintops themselves, the view is amazing.

The cultural spots: *fukuzatsu*, and pretty. *Fukuzatsu* roughly translates to complicated/complex, and connotes depth -- such as the tradition behind every aspect of *sado*, the tea ceremony; or the history of warlord Hideyoshi's life at the Osaka castle; or the meaning of each *hoko* parade float at the Gion festival. At other places, like the Great Buddha at Nara or the mountaintop Kurama temple, I was content to just marvel at the picturesque buildings and nature scenery.

New friends: growing. Interacting, conversing, and hanging out with a variety of new friends (my host family, Taiwanese/French/Chinese classmates, Filipino expats from church, etc) has been both incredibly fun and expanded my vision a bit to the world outside high school and college life. In the beginning, coming in with no friends or set group was a little lonely. But in the end, although my social life wasn't one consistent group every day, hanging out with different circles felt a bit more like normal life rather than the study-abroad-program-bubble -- but much more exciting and fun than normal life, since every day after school I could just explore the city with friends.

Old friends: *natsukashii* (nostalgic/fond memories), and precious. Although most of my month was about new experiences and people and places, I treasure the time I got to spend with Japanese friends from a cultural exchange two summers ago. It was not only wonderful seeing them again after two years, but also special meeting up in their country rather than the US, and seeing Japan from their eyes.

My experience: colorful -- literally and figuratively. The translucent green of *kaede* leaves in the sunlight, the light blue of the sky and clouds hiding the sun, the bright red of lantern-lit *torii* gates, the misty gray of the city after a sprinkle of rain, the dark brown of the wooden houses and shrines, the bright golden decor on many temples and roofs. Beyond the visual feast, my month has been a palette of so many different experiences: laughing at ridiculous skits in class, making *okonomiyaki* at home for dinner with my host family, wandering into random one-room exhibits in downtown Nara, karaoke at the arcades, waking up on the mountaintop bench because of the rain drops on my face, passing the noisy stalls of a riverside street festival/market, eating matcha *kakigoori* shaved ice (for the third time) in Uji, opting for the hour-long walk home at night rather than busing, feeding peanuts to monkeys at Arashiyama,

and, on my last night in Japan, watching Kansai's biggest fireworks show at Lake Biwako -- an absolutely spectacular burst of (literal) colors and light unlike any I've seen before (including NYC and DC on the Fourth of July). The crowds afterward were also a first for me, 2-3 hours to walk to the station, a distance which usually takes 5 minutes -- yet it all contributed to a truly memorable experience.

Leaving Kyoto and my new friends and host family was hard, of course, but tempered by the fact that I know I'll return to Japan at some point, and likely in just a couple years for study abroad in college. I'm so grateful to KCCJEE for granting me this amazing opportunity to improve my Japanese, increase cultural understanding, and leave a bit of my heart in Kyoto.

